

“New Atheism” (and “New Humanism”)

by James Farmelant

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Something unprecedented happened in American publishing in the last three years. Several books defending atheism hit the best-seller charts—even though our politics had suffered in recent decades a theocratic drift due to the rise of the Christian Right.

The authors of these books are a mixed lot. Sam Harris was an obscure graduate student of neuroscience when his first book, *The End of Faith* (2004),¹ suddenly propelled him to fame. Christopher Hitchens, the author of *god is not Great* (2007),² is a well-known British-American political journalist who, after September 11th (2001) shifted from the radical Left to the neo-conservative Right. Daniel Dennett, Director of the Tufts University Center for Cognitive Studies, was noted for his work in the philosophy of mind long before he wrote *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006),³ and had enjoyed popular success with his 1995 book, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*.⁴ Oxford professor Richard Dawkins is a famous evolutionary biologist. His *The Selfish Gene* (1976)⁵ popularized the gene-centered view of evolution (as developed by such biologists as William Hamilton, George Williams, John Maynard Smith and Robert Trivers) and presented his own concept of “memes,” units of cultural inheritance considered analogous to genes;⁶ his *The Extended Phenotype* (1982)⁷ argued that an organism’s phenotype is not limited to the traits of its own body, but can extend into its environment, including effects on the bodies of other organisms; and his *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986)⁸ defended Darwinism and criticized the “argument from design” as presented by William Paley (the theologian whose writings Darwin had studied as a divinity student at Cambridge).

Three of these four writers had won, before their recent books appeared, some notoriety (in varying degrees) as defenders of atheism, though without getting as much attention as when President Bush set such a disastrous example of Christian piety in action. Dawkins was known in England as a spokesman for atheism and secular humanism, and in that capacity had often participated in debates and appeared in the media. Hitchens, while mainly a political journalist, occasionally published articles and books defending atheism⁹ and criticizing such notable religious figures as Mother Teresa.¹⁰ Dennett had, in *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, described natural selection as an algorithmic process in Nature and as, in human thinking, a “universal acid” that eats its way through traditional beliefs. He had distinguished between (a) miraculous “skyhooks” (alleged sources of design-complexity not built on lower, simpler layers) and (b) “cranes,” concepts which, though themselves founded solidly “on the ground” of physical science, allow for the construction of complex entities; and he had said that creationism and the concept of “intelligent design” are leading examples of theories that rely upon “skyhooks” to do their explanatory work, whereas Darwin’s theory of evolution through natural selection is a leading example of a theory relying on “cranes”.

In this article I will discuss Harris's *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, Dawkins's *The God Delusion* and Hitchens's *god is not Great*. Although the label "New Atheists" was (as far as I know) first used in 2005 by a journalist¹¹ who was writing about Michel Onfray,¹² Julian Baggini,¹³ Erik J. Wielenberg¹⁴ and Daniel Harbour¹⁵ as well as about Harris, the work of these other writers, however worthy it may be, won relatively little attention, and meanwhile the mass media picked up the term from another journalist's application of it in 2006 to Harris, Dennett and Dawkins.¹⁶

Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* was the first of the very successful New Atheist books. It defends reason over faith, calls for a secular jihad against Islam, and praises certain forms of Eastern spirituality that are compatible with atheism. Harris's defense of reason over faith is so reminiscent of well-known earlier writings such as Bertrand Russell's *Why I am Not a Christian*¹⁷ that I needn't discuss it at length here. An interesting argument in it is that while religious moderation may be in its own right preferable to religious fundamentalism and extremism, religious moderates not only mislead us into respecting "the idea that certain fantastic propositions can be believed without evidence," but also abet (even if inadvertently) the fundamentalists, by, among other things, diverting our attention from the role that religious faith plays in perpetuating human conflicts.

While Harris is very critical of the organized faiths of the West, he regards Islam as even more reprehensible, and he takes very seriously the "clash of civilizations" thesis popularized in recent years by Samuel Huntington.¹⁸ Harris says that Islam itself, as a faith, has caused most of the terrorism that one should worry about, and that it threatens civilization far more than do Christianity and Judaism because it has (he says) never undergone anything like the Reformation or the Enlightenment. He says that many passages in the Koran counsel violence in the name of Allah, and that whereas Christians advocating violence have to distort the words of Jesus, their Muslim counterparts have to do no such thing. He says:

We are at war with Islam. It may not serve our immediate foreign policy objectives for our political leaders to openly acknowledge this fact, but it is unambiguously so. It is not merely that we are at war with an otherwise peaceful religion that has been "hijacked" by extremists. We are at war with precisely the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran, and further elaborated in the literature of the hadith, which recounts the sayings and teachings of the Prophet.¹⁹

And:

To see the role that faith plays in propagating Muslim violence, we need only ask why so many Muslims are eager to turn themselves into bombs these days. The answer: because the Koran makes this activity seem like a career opportunity. Nothing in the history of Western colonialism explains this behavior (though we can certainly concede that this history offers us much to atone for). Subtract the Muslim belief in martyrdom and jihad, and the actions of suicide bombers become completely unintelligible... Anyone who says that the doctrines of Islam have "nothing to do with terrorism"... is just playing a game with words.²⁰

According to Harris, Mohammed not only advocated violence, but also was, by his own account, an accomplished practitioner of it. And Harris considers Islam to be the most intolerant of the major world faiths. So even though he is very critical of Bush's Christian fundamentalism, he says that the Bush administration has not been militant enough in opposing Islamic terrorism,

and he presents a philosophical argument (as an undergraduate he had studied philosophy) that the use of torture is morally permissible in that fight.²¹

A thorough discussion concerning Harris's arguments on that subject, important as it is, would be beyond the scope of this article, so let me turn now to another notable aspect of Harris's book. In a chapter on "Experiments in Consciousness" (and not least in some of the footnotes) he takes note of the fact that certain modes of Eastern spirituality are compatible with atheism. That in of itself is not particularly controversial; a few schools of Hindu philosophy and much of Buddhism are avowedly atheist. Nor is Harris's endorsement of meditation likely to upset very many atheists or humanists. Few of them would challenge his call for more scientific research on the psychological and physiological effects of various spiritual practices. But many atheists do take exception to his argument that certain varieties of Eastern mysticism are not only "rational" but also "scientific" and can reveal truths about the nature of reality outside the organism. Harris explicitly challenges the view that consciousness is necessarily a product of the brain. While most contemporary neuroscientists and philosophers of mind seem to subscribe to one variety or another of physicalism, Harris—himself a student of neuroscience—sees no scientific basis for claiming that consciousness is entirely dependent on the workings of the central nervous system. He says, "[T]he truth is that we simply do not know what happens after death."²²

I would concede that it is logically possible for an atheist to believe in immortality or, for that matter, in contra-causal free will. (The British idealist philosopher, J. M. E. McTaggart, was an atheist who believed in immortality,²³ and Jean-Paul Sartre rejected belief in God and in immortality while accepting the concept of contra-causal free will.²⁴) But most Western atheists are philosophical naturalists, and as such would sense an inconsistency between denying the existence of God and holding out hope for survival after death. The concern that good scientific explanations be ontologically parsimonious leads many naturalists to be skeptical not only about explanations in terms of divine entities, but also about the notion of consciousness floating around somewhere other than in a brain; yet if consciousness cannot exist apart from the brain, then when the one dies, so does the other. Hume remarked (*ca.*1755):

The weakness of the body and that of the mind in infancy are exactly proportioned; their vigor in manhood, their sympathetic disorder in sickness, their common gradual decay in old age. The step further seems unavoidable; their common dissolution in death.²⁵

Harris's *The End of Faith* has been nearly as controversial among atheists and secular humanists—or at least among those who have published reviews of it—as among religionists. He concedes that his use of terms like "spirituality" and "mysticism" (and especially "scientific mysticism" and "rational mysticism") is problematic, but argues that there is a lack of good alternative terms. I would not oppose that argument vigorously, even though other recent authors, such as Thomas W. Clark,²⁶ have written effectively on "naturalistic spirituality"; and I would agree that the cultivation of certain types of spiritual practices can be beneficial; but I would part company with Harris's apparent willingness to concede points wholesale to Eastern mysticism.

Harris has responded in his *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006)²⁷ to the many Christian critics of *The End of Faith* and especially to the fundamentalists among them. This more recent book of his offers a battery of arguments against conservative Christian positions on a wide variety of issues ranging from theism *vs.* atheism and evolution *vs.* creationism to medical ethics (in regard to abortion and stem-cell research), and it shows that scripturally based morality is incoherent because of contradictory injunctions in the bible. Given two such contradictory

precepts, the believer usually claims biblical authority for just one of them, chosen according to his own moral feeling; that is tantamount to circular reasoning.

Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* presents a scientific explanation of religiosity. Dennett says that it is unnecessary to invoke any kind of supernatural entity or powers (such as deities, spirits or invisible beings) in order to account for the existence of religion, and that the development of a scientific understanding of it is imperative because of its social and cultural importance. He says this book is addressed primarily to Americans—and not just to academics, but also to “curious and conscientious citizens” at large—and that some non-Americans with whom he had shared a draft of the text had found it somewhat provincial; but:

“Up to now, there has been [in the USA] a largely unexamined mutual agreement that scientists and other researchers will leave religion alone, or restrict themselves to a few sidelong glances, since people get so upset at the mere thought of a more intensive inquiry. I propose to disrupt this presumption, and examine it.”²⁸

(So he is addressing non-academic readers *and* trying to persuade fellow academics to embark on scientific investigations of a certain kind.)

The book is organized into three main parts. Part I argues that natural science can and should investigate religion. Part II shows how some methods of evolutionary biology, including especially evolutionary psychology and Dawkins's memetics, can be used to develop theories of how modern religions have evolved from ancient folk beliefs. Part III, focusing on the effects of religion nowadays, addresses such issues as morality and seeking meaning in one's life.

One should avoid certain misunderstandings when evaluating Dennett's project. A reviewer writing in one of the religious journals says:

[I]t does not logically follow that, simply because religion as such is a natural phenomenon, it cannot become the vehicle of divine truth, or that it is not in some sense oriented toward a transcendent reality. To imagine that it does so follow is to fall prey to a version of the genetic fallacy, the belief that one need only determine the causal sequence by which something comes into being in order to understand its nature, meaning, content, uses, or value.²⁹

But Dennett disclaims any attempt in *this* book to disprove religious beliefs. He does not argue that a scientific explanation of religion, whether along the lines that he proposes or along other lines, would, even if fully verified, disprove the truth-claims of religion. The “spell” that he is primarily hoping to break is not that of religious faith, but the notion that religion is off-limits to scientific inquiry, taboo—though he personally is interested also in breaking what he calls “the second spell,” i.e. of religion itself. He says that many people, because they are afraid of weakening this second spell, resist the effort to break the first one, but he sees no good reason why they themselves should be unwilling to engage in an inquiry such as his in this book. I can understand their concern, however. To the extent that religion proves susceptible to scientific explanation, some of its plausibility is undermined, since the fact that people believe deeply in its claims can then be explained without reference to anything supernatural. If a god exists, He could have used mechanisms such as the natural selection of genes and memes in order to produce human beings disposed to worship Him; and yet the more that is achieved by scientific explanations of religion, the less need may be felt to posit a god in order to explain its existence, since the relevant phenomena would presumably still be the same in the absence of such a Being. Thus a scientific explanation of religion would, I think, tend to undermine its plausibility even

without, strictly speaking, disproving its truth-claims. So I expect that many religious believers will resist Dennett's effort at dispelling the "first spell."

Dennett sees himself as carrying forward Hume's attempt to develop a "natural history" of religion.³⁰ He sees our propensity to religious faith as having deep roots in human nature, and he tries to bring to bear the findings of cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology and cognitive anthropology to discovering those roots. He sets out a tentative theory of how religion evolved. Contrary to what readers familiar with his general views on evolution might expect, he does not hold that religiosity evolved because it was beneficial to the human species. Rather, he thinks it is a byproduct of processes that evolved for other reasons. He thinks that it is engendered partly by our "hardwired" susceptibility to hypnotic or quasi-hypnotic suggestion, a susceptibility that evolved because it made children more prone to accept whatever their parents and elders wished to them accept, and thereby facilitated transmitting information from one generation to the next. He suggests that this susceptibility was beneficial, not just because it helped children learn vicariously from the experiences of their elders, but also because (among other things) of the placebo effect by which shamans could get the body to mobilize its self-healing mechanisms.

Dennett draws upon the work of cognitive anthropologists like Scott Atran³¹ and Pascal Boyer,³² who have argued that religion is, in effect, a spandrel (to use a term popularized by Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin³³)—a side-effect of certain (in this case cognitive) adaptations that had evolved for other reasons. Altran has argued that we have an innate tendency to anthropomorphize, to project intentionality onto the world (and we thus normally treat other people as intentional agents, i.e., as creatures acting as they do because of their thoughts and preferences). Boyer has argued that religions characteristically suppose that (a) there is at least one supernatural agent taking a specific ontologic form (e.g. animal, tree, human), (b) something memorably different about it is an ontologic violation (e.g. the animal talks, the tree records conversation, the human being is born of a virgin), and (c) the agent has strategic information which it can use for or against one. Dennett argues that to treat other "systems" (i.e., other than oneself) as intentional agents is especially likely to be adaptive if they are well-structured and well-functioning, but he applies Altran's and Boyer's insights to show how we are prone to overuse this heuristic, and what consequences ensue. The argument is along the following lines: Although it is not adaptive to shout at your automobile if it fails to start or to kick your computer if it freezes up, it is adaptive for, say, a hunter to think of his prey as actively planning to avoid his attentions. The intentional stance evolved because those species of animals that acquired it gained thereby some competitive advantages over other species that were their rivals or their predators. But the intentional stance, once acquired, can become hyperactivated. The anthropomorphizing of certain natural phenomena—for instance, regarding the sun and the stars as sentient, intelligent beings—is a "misfiring" of this cognitive skill; and such misfirings might be responsible for the human tendency to posit mythical Beings as governing the world. This would explain why prehistoric peoples were so prone to create and believe in ghost stories and to posit spirits as explanations for the phenomena around them; and hence "folk religion":

... the sorts of religion that have no written creeds, no theologians, no hierarchies of officials. Before any of the great organized religions existed, there were folk religions, and these provided the cultural environment from which organized religions could emerge.³⁴

Dennett suggests that organized religions emerged from folk religions through processes of "memetic" evolution. Memes (defined by Dawkins as units of cultural inheritance analogous to genes) are ideas and/or practices—including, for instance, songs and rituals—that can replicate from one brain to another. The theory shared by Dennett with Dawkins (its inventor) is

that memes underlie cultural evolution somewhat as genes do biological evolution. Some genes become more common and others less so as they are differentially selected by their environments on the basis of their adaptiveness; and likewise with memes. Dennett thinks that religions, as cultural phenomena, can be understood in memetic terms and that their evolution has been governed by principles of variation and selection analogous to the principles governing biological evolution. Thus folk religions would, like other forms of folk culture, have been characterized by various mechanisms, including group chants and rituals, ensuring their reliable transmission from one generation (of people in a given culture) to the next. But meanwhile they would occasionally undergo “mutations” (just as genes do), most of which might presumably not prove to be adaptive, but some of which would turn out to be more so than certain older memes, and would therefore spread at their expense. Dennett, like Dawkins, views memes as “selfish replicators,” but while Dawkins insists upon regarding religious memes as a kind of virus spreading at the expense of its hosts’ interests, Dennett remains open-minded when asking to what extent religious memes may harm or benefit their hosts.

Dennett believes that the emergence of organized religions from folk religions came after the development of agricultural societies. The emergence of agricultural societies changed profoundly the environments in which religious memes existed. And meanwhile:

Memes that foster human group solidarity are particularly fit (as memes) in circumstances in which host survival (and hence host group fitness) most directly depends on hosts’ joining forces in groups. The success of such meme-infested groups is itself a potent broadcasting device, including outgroup curiosity (and envy) and thus permitting linguistic, ethnic, and geographic boundaries to be more readily penetrated.³⁵

According to Dennett, as human communities became more settled because of their use of agriculture (rather than nomadic pursuits), trade began to develop between communities, the number of occupations consequently increased, workers in these various occupations became more organized in order to skim off more of the benefits of the increased trade, and then the priests and shamans became better organized too, and sought to establish quasi-monopolies over religious practice. It was in the interest of these specialists to regularize religious practices and belief systems. The memes of folk religion had evolved without conscious guidance, but those of the new, institutional religions had stewards “domesticating” them. Dennett draws an analogy between what happened to religious memes and what happened to animals like sheep or cattle once they became domesticated. Just as human breeders of animals tended to replace processes of natural selection (among the animals) with artificial selection, so the professional specialists in religion, the priests, began to consciously engineer and re-engineer religious memes. And then, as societies became more elaborately stratified, the role of religion became important in fostering social cohesion. Dennett draws here upon the work of Jared Diamond,³⁶ who has suggested that in the wake of the initial agricultural revolution, societies fell under the domination of “kleptocracies” as divisions developed between rich and poor, and religion became important for maintaining social order by reconciling the poor to their lot.

James Brookfield, a Marxist reviewer of Dennett’s book,³⁷ likes his “materialist” approach but takes him to task for ignoring Marxist treatments of the history of religion. Brookfield says that Dennett’s analysis benefits from his use of a neo-Darwinian framework, but is too abstract, and could have benefited also from treating religion as a form of ideology rooted in economic relations in human societies. I think Dennett did take some of these factors into account when drawing upon Jared Diamond’s work, but that Diamond’s analysis itself is rather abstract and lacking in the historical specificity characteristic of the best Marxist writing on religion. That writing has focused on how the development of institutional religions has been

conditioned by class divisions and on how religious conflicts often amount, at least in part, to economic-class conflicts. Brookfield applies to Dennett, Engels's criticism of Feuerbach:

In the form he is realistic since he takes his start from man; but... this... remains always the same abstract man who occupied the field in the philosophy of religion.³⁸

I think that more than one of the New Atheists should, as Ralph Dumain has suggested,³⁹ pay more attention to modern social thought (whether Marxist or not). I do not mean, however, to call for revisiting the sociobiology wars of the 1970s and 1980s; it seems to me that the kind of evolutionary psychology that Dennett's book advocates and a Marxist approach such as Brookfield favors can provide complementary rather than antagonistic perspectives.⁴⁰

Dennett's important book should be read with a certain kind of patience. The first part of it (presenting his case for the scientific study of religion) could, I think, have been reduced by half without losing substance. The second part (presenting his theories as to the origins and evolution of religion) tends to meander into asides which, while often brilliant and informative, distract one from the main argument. There are several appendices with material that Dennett evidently found unsuitable for inclusion in the main text; I think that that text should have been shorter and there should have been, if need be, more appendices and perhaps, in the main text, some German-style *excursus* passages in smaller type. (In fairness I should mention that Dennett's viva-voce lectures are well organized and concise. Some of their texts are available on the internet.)

Richard Dawkins performs several interesting tasks in *The God Delusion*.⁴¹ He describes in some detail "the God hypothesis" and refutes an impressive array of traditional arguments for it: ontological, cosmological, arguments from design, from personal experience, from beauty, from scripture, the Bayesian arguments and Pascal's Wager. There is little new here, but many readers may find informative the lucid and entertaining accounts of the arguments and their refutations. Then he presents a new argument (albeit in the spirit of Hume) as to the improbability of a divine Creator/Designer notwithstanding that astronomer Fred Hoyle once included, in a book entitled *Evolution from Space* (1982),⁴² a reckoning that the probability of a simple biological cell occurring all at once as a chance chemical construction long ago on Earth (an event which no biologist presumes to have happened) is comparable to the probability of a tornado assembling a Boeing 747 from a scrap-yard. Hume argued that the improbability of life did not necessarily imply a Designer; but his suggestions of alternative explanations were, perforce, extremely speculative, though more sensible than the one that Hoyle was to reject.⁴³ It was Darwinism that meanwhile provided a scientifically testable and well verified alternative to the hypothesis of intelligent design—and thereby, Dawkins says, made it really feasible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist. Dawkins argues that a divine Designer/Creator would have to be more complex than the world that He (or She) creates, but that since the more complex a system is, the less probable it is, the intelligent-design theory explains something improbable in terms of something else even more so. Dawkins rebuts the theological argument that god is simple. The god that most theists believe in is supposed to interact with the world, intervene in its workings, communicate with and judge His creatures, etc. Such a Being, processing unimaginably vast amounts of information, would have to be extremely complex; Dawkins concludes that there is almost certainly no such thing.

His discussion of the evolutionary origins of religion is fairly similar to Dennett's (the two men are mutually influential friends), but cites somewhat different research findings and data.

Dawkins discusses also, among other things, the "anthropic principle" relating the structure of the universe and the apparent constants in the laws of Nature to the conditions

necessary for the evolution of human beings.⁴⁴ There are several versions of the principle. They all say that the structure and laws of the universe have to be such as to enable the formation of the four elements (hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen, oxygen) necessary for life as we know it; the universe has to be old enough—say, ten billion years—for complex carbon-based organisms to have evolved, but not so old that the sun and other stars would have extinguished and conditions thereby become fatal. These limits have implications as to how far the universe can have expanded since the big bang; and then, what about the magnitudes of the fundamental physical constants? If, for instance, Newton’s gravitational constant were even slightly different from what it is, our universe would not (so the argument goes) have supported the emergence of life as we know it.

Some versions of the anthropic principle tend to imply either a teleological structure or the existence of a set of different possible universes whereby we live in one that may be rare, in that it has physical properties enabling life to evolve. In this context a few scientists (e.g., Freeman Dyson⁴⁵) vote for teleology (a Creator who fine-tuned the physical constants just right), but more favor the idea that our universe is just one of many, each of which may have somewhat distinct physical constants and/or physical laws. The multiverse concept seems ontologically extravagant, but Dawkins argues that since each universe would have simple fundamental laws the concept does not involve positing something that would be so very improbable statistically. He thinks the multiverse idea may appeal to people whose consciousness “has been raised” by an appreciation of the principle of natural selection. He describes cosmologist Lee Smolin’s version of the idea, according to which universes replicate themselves by generating “cosmic singularities” (the black holes) and different types of universe replicate at different rates, thereby giving rise to a kind of “natural selection” among them. Dawkins is intrigued by the possibility that the principle of natural selection might operate at the cosmological level. He doesn’t ask how many cosmic singularities could dance on the tip of a pin.⁴⁶

Christopher Hitchens’s *god is not Great*,⁴⁷ the most recent of the five books under discussion here, recaps some of the down-to-earth arguments of the other New Atheists. Hitchens draws upon Dennett’s and Dawkins’s ideas in arguing that religion can be explained in naturalistic terms, and he agrees with Harris that religious moderates provide a cover under which fundamentalists and fanatics can operate. The book reflects his decades-long experience as a journalist observing the current evils of religion. When he discusses the often pernicious role that it has played in such trouble spots as the Middle East, the Balkans and Northern Ireland, he can back up his points with a wealth of anecdotes from his many travels to those places. And his book includes a chapter on the role that religion has played in impeding public-health initiatives. Two examples are (a) Roman Catholic bishops discouraging the faithful from using condoms, notwithstanding all the evidence that condoms impede the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, and (b) imams in Nigeria dissuading their congregations from participating in immunization programs—and thereby enabling smallpox and polio, both of which had been on the brink of eradication, to flourish and ravage anew.

This book includes rather sharp chapters about the bible. In its historical narratives Hitchens finds internal inconsistencies and contradictions with archeological findings. (His discussion of the New Testament is enlivened with citations from Thomas Paine and H. L. Mencken.) He also gives equal treatment to the Koran, and skewers Hinduism and Buddhism as well for promoting superstitions and bolstering oppressive social structures.

His account of how Joseph Smith (1805-1844) launched the Mormon Church cites convincing documentary evidence that Smith was essentially a charlatan. From this fascinating tale of conscious and successful fraud Hitchens seeks insight into the nature of organized religions in general and into how the older ones may have begun.

Sam Harris's almost apocalyptic view of strife between the West and Islam highlights the important issue of how atheists and Western humanists ought to regard Muslims; so I would like to complete this essay with a brief account of the "New Humanism" promoted by the Humanist chaplain (since 2005) at Harvard, Greg Epstein. He is an atheist and yet, as such, is trying, with help from some internationally renowned fellow atheists like Amartya Sen and Salmon Rushdie, to promote a tolerant, multicultural and inclusive Humanist attitude toward people of faith.⁴⁸ He points to Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson (an agnostic) as an eminent example of a Humanist who has, with some success, sought the cooperation of religious groups such as the Southern (USA) Baptists in addressing a common concern, global warming.⁴⁹

The presence of humanist and even atheist tendencies within the major religions may facilitate some significant kinds of rapprochement. Epstein himself is an ordained rabbi in the Humanist Jewish movement founded by the late Sherwin Wine.⁵⁰ That movement embraces Jewish culture while rejecting all forms of supernaturalism, including theism; it takes Jewish history and culture as sources of Jewish identity rather than of theological beliefs. There have been humanist and even atheistic tendencies in modern Christianity as well. Graham Greene was a famous convert to Roman Catholicism but described himself in his later years as a "Catholic atheist";⁵¹ George Santayana was also an avowed atheist who made no secret of his attachment to Roman Catholicism. And liberal Protestant theology has included certain tendencies that have often been interpreted as atheistic. Sidney Hook said of Paul Tillich:

With amazing courage Tillich boldly says that the God of the multitudes does not exist, and further, that to believe in His existence is to believe in an idol and ultimately to embrace superstition. God cannot be an entity among entities, even the highest. He is being-in-itself. In this sense Tillich's God is like the God of Spinoza and the God of Hegel. Both Spinoza and Hegel were denounced for their atheism by the theologians of the past because their God was not a Being or an Entity. Tillich, however, is one of the foremost theologians of our time.⁵²

Islam has not been immune to such tendencies. Salmon Rushdie has described how, when he was a child in India, his family included people who were quite secular in outlook (such as his father) as well as pious folk (such as his grandfather), and yet was very harmonious.⁵³ The well-known British political activist and writer Tariq Ali has described likewise his own family background in Pakistan.⁵⁴ Fundamentalist Islam such as we see now was largely unknown back then. And there are said to be millions of atheists and agnostics even today in Muslim countries.⁵⁵ For reasons of this kind, Epstein calls for Humanism to avoid overemphasizing its Western roots.

At the same time, I think it is important that atheists and secular humanists make an effort to understand the reasons why fundamentalist Islam and Islamism have acquired the degree of popularity that they have over the last three decades. Some important factors in the rise of Islamism, in my opinion, include the decline of secular leftist and nationalist movements in Muslim countries. As the secular left declined, a political vacuum was created into which Islamist political movements were able to step in as the new tribunes for the poor and the alienated in those countries. If secular humanism is to regain traction in those countries, humanists there must once again learn how to articulate the needs for the poor and oppressed in their own countries.

Much has been made of the idea that the New Humanism is somehow opposed to the New Atheism, but I think they are more complementary than antagonistic. The New Atheists have won a space in American culture providing new opportunities for those atheist Humanists

who adopt a more conciliatory approach towards the religious and thereby contribute to securing that space.

¹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (W.W.Norton, 2004)

² Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Twelve Books, Hachette Book Group, 2007)

³ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (Viking, 2006)

⁴ Daniel Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (Simon & Schuster, 1995)

⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1989)

⁶ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, p.192: "We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. 'Mimeme' comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like 'gene'. I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any consolation, it could alternatively be thought of as being related to 'memory', or to the French word *même*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with 'cream'."

⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The Extended Phenotype* (Oxford University Press, 1982)

⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (Norton & Company, 1986)

⁹ For example, Christopher Hitchens, "The Lord and the intellectuals: they're too smart to believe in God, but they all believe in religion", in *Harper's Magazine*, July 1982, pp.60-63.

¹⁰ Hitchens, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice* (Verso Books, 1995).

¹¹ Ronald Aronson, "Faith no more?" in *BookForum*, October/November 2005, pp.16-19.

¹² Michel Onfray, *Traité d'athéologie* (Grasset, 2005); translated by Jeremy Leggatt as *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam* (Arcade Publishing, 2007).

¹³ Julian Baggini, *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford Univ. Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2005).

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- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, quoted from Frederick Engels, tr. Paul Taylor, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy* (Progress Books, 1946).
- ³⁹ Ralph Dumain, "On atheism, irreligion, and rationality," statement for a panel discussion in Washington DC, 19 May 2007; text available at www.autodidactproject.org/my/atheism-DCIC.html.
- ⁴⁰ Alan Carling has sought to bring together historical materialist and neo-Darwinian perspectives. See his *Social Division* (Verso, 1991); "Analytical Marxism and historical materialism: the debate on social evolution," in *Science & Society*, 57/1 (Spring 1993), pp.31-65; and "The strength of historical materialism: a comment," in *Science & Society*, 58/1 (Spring 1994), pp.60-72.
- ⁴¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Bantam, 2006)
- ⁴² Fred Hoyle and N.C. Widramasinghe, *Evolution from Space* (1984)
- ⁴³ Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (first published posthumously in 1779). In Part VIII, a modified version of the Epicurean hypothesis is described, according to which some chance arrangements of atoms form orderly structures that persist over time because their orderliness confers survival advantages.
- ⁴⁴ See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anthropic_principle). The term was introduced in 1973 by Brandon Carter. Some of the ideas as to limits on the age and size of the universe had been published in the 1950s by Robert H. Dicke.
- ⁴⁵ Freeman Dyson, "Time without end: physics and biology in an open universe," in *Reviews of Modern Physics* **51**, pp.447-460; text available at www.aleph.se/Trans/Global/Omega/dyson.txt.
- ⁴⁶ Dawkins does not discuss the claim that the multiverse hypothesis is no more falsifiable than that of an Intelligent Designer and is therefore objectionable. His favorite cosmologist, Lee Smolin, argues, in "Scientific alternatives to the anthropic principle" (available online at <http://arxiv.org/abs/hep-th/0407213> and published in Bernard Carr ed., *Universe or Multiverse?*, Cambridge Univ. Press, 2007), that the multiverse hypothesis does make empirically falsifiable predictions.

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- 47 Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*
- 48 David Niose, "Interview with Greg Epstein, Humanist Chaplain of Harvard." *The Humanist* (March-April 2007), pp.20-24; text available at www.secularstudents.org/node/602.
- 49 See E. O. Wilson, *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* (W. W. Norton, 2006).
- 50 See www.shj.org/wine.htm.
- 51 Quoted in V. S. Pritchett, "The human factor in Graham Greene," in *The New York Times*, 26 February 1978.
- 52 Sidney Hook, "The atheism of Paul Tillich," in S. Hook, ed., *Religious Experience and Truth: A Symposium*, (New York Univ. Press, 1961). Tillich himself said (in his *Theology of Culture*, Oxford Univ. Press, 1959, p. 5): "If you start with the question whether God does or does not exist, you can never reach Him, and if you assert that He does exist, you can reach Him even less than if you assert that He does not exist. A God about whose existence or non-existence you can argue is a thing besides others within the universe of existing things." He went on to praise the scientifically minded critics of the traditional arguments for the existence of God: "Actually, they have not only not refuted religion, but they have done it a considerable service. They have forced it to reconsider and restate the meaning of the tremendous word *God*."
- 53 Salman Rushdie, impromptu public talk upon receiving on 20 April 2007, at the "New Humanism" Conference at Harvard, the Humanist Chaplaincy's "Outstanding Lifetime Achievement Award in Cultural Humanism."
- 54 Harry Kreisler, "Islam, empire, and the Left: conversation with Tariq Ali, Editor, *New Left Review*" (8 May 2003); text available at <http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/Elberg/Ali/ali-con1.html>.
- 55 David Abel, "The nonbelievers," in *Boston Globe Magazine*, 16 September 2007; text available at www.boston.com/news/globe/magazine/articles/2007/09/16/the_nonbelievers.